

Theodosius I

Theodosius I (Latin: *Flavius Theodosius Augustus*;^[1] Greek: Θεοδοῖος Α΄; 11 January 347 – 17 January 395), also known as **Theodosius the Great**, was a Roman Emperor from 379 to 395, and the last emperor to rule over both the Eastern and the Western halves of the Roman Empire. On accepting his elevation, he campaigned against Goths and other barbarians who had invaded the Empire. His resources were not sufficient to destroy them or drive them out, which had been Roman policy for centuries in dealing with invaders. By treaty, which followed his indecisive victory at the end of the Gothic War, they were established as *foederati*, autonomous allies of the Empire, south of the Danube, in Illyricum, within the Empire's borders. They were given lands and allowed to remain under their own leaders, a grave departure from Roman hegemonic ways. This turn away from traditional policies was accommodationist and had enormous consequences for the Western Empire from the beginning of the fifth century, as the Romans found themselves with the impossible task of defending the borders and dealing with unruly federates within. Theodosius I was obliged to fight two destructive civil wars, successively defeating the usurpers Magnus Maximus in 387–388 and Eugenius in 394, though not without material cost to the power of the Empire.

He issued decrees that effectively made Nicene Christianity the official state church of the Roman Empire.^{[2][3]} He neither prevented nor punished the destruction of prominent Hellenistic temples of classical antiquity, including the Temple of Apollo in Delphi and the Serapeum in Alexandria. He dissolved the Order of the Vestal Virgins in Rome. In 393, he banned the pagan rituals of the Olympics in Ancient Greece. After his death, Theodosius's young sons Arcadius and Honorius inherited the east and west halves of the empire respectively, and the Roman Empire was never again re-united, though Eastern Roman emperors after Zeno would claim the united title after Julius Nepos's death in 480.

Theodosius is considered a saint by the Armenian Apostolic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church^[4], and his feast day is on January 17.^[5]

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Theodosius I	
<i>Augustus</i>	
 <div>Missorium of Theodosius, found in 1847 in Almedralejo, Spain</div>	
Emperor of the Roman Empire	
Reign	19 January 379 – 15 May 392 (emperor in the East); <div></div> 15 May 392 – 17 January 395 (whole empire)
Predecessor	Valens in the East <div></div> Gratian in the West <div></div> Valentinian II in the West
Successor	Arcadius in the East; <div></div> Honorius in the West
Co-emperors	Gratian (Western Emperor, 379–383) <div></div> Valentinian II (Western Emperor, 379–392) <div></div> Magnus Maximus (Western Emperor, 384–388) <div></div> Flavius Victor (Western Emperor, 384–388) <div></div> Arcadius (383–395) <div></div> Honorius (393–395)
Born	11 January 347 <div></div> Coca or Italica, modern Spain

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Died	17 January 395 (aged 48) <div>Mediolanum, modern Italy</div>
Burial	Church of the Holy Apostles, Constantinople
Spouse	1) Aelia Flaccilla (?–385) <div>2) Galla (?–394)</div>
Issue	Arcadius <div>Honorius</div> <div>Pulcheria</div> <div>Galla Placidia</div>
Full name	<div>Flavius Theodosius</div>
Regnal name	<div>Imperator Caesar Flavius Theodosius Augustus</div>
Dynasty	Theodosian
Father	Theodosius the Elder
Mother	Thermantia
Religion	Nicene Christianity

Career

Flavius Theodosius was born in Cauca, Carthaginensis, Hispania (according to Hydatius and Zosimus)^[6] or in Italica, Baetica, Hispania (according to Themistius, Claudius Claudianus, or Marcellinus Comes),^[7] to a senior military officer, Theodosius the Elder^[8] and his wife Thermantia. Theodosius learned his military lessons by campaigning with his father's staff in Britannia where he went to help quell the Great Conspiracy in 368.

In about 373, he became governor of Upper Moesia and oversaw hostilities against the Sarmatians and thereafter against the Alemanni. He was military commander (*dux*) of Moesia, a Roman province on the lower Danube, in 374, when the empire faced a formidable eruption of the Quadi and Sarmatians, the neighboring province of Illyricum being in fact briefly overrun.^[9] Theodosius is reported to have defended his province with marked ability and success.^[9]

The death of emperor Valentinian I in 375 created political pandemonium. The sudden disgrace and execution of Theodosius' father, Theodosius the Elder, in 376 remains unexplained. At about the same time Theodosius abruptly retired to his family estates in the province of Gallaecia (present day Galicia, Spain and northern Portugal) where he adopted the life of a provincial aristocrat. The reason for his retirement, and the relationship (if any) between it and his father's death is uncertain, though probable.

From 364 to 375, the Roman Empire had been governed by two co-emperors, the brothers Valentinian I and Valens; when Valentinian died in 375, his sons, Valentinian II and Gratian, succeeded him as rulers of the Western Roman Empire. In 378, after the disastrous Battle of Adrianople where Valens was killed, Gratian invited Theodosius to take command of the Illyrian army.

Family



Nummus of Theodosius I

By his first wife, the probably Spanish Aelia Flaccilla Augusta, he had two sons, Arcadius and Honorius, and a daughter, Aelia Pulcheria; Arcadius was his heir in the East and Honorius in the West. Both Aelia Flaccilla and Pulcheria died in 385.

His second wife (but never declared *Augusta*) was Galla, daughter of the emperor Valentinian I and his second wife Justina. Theodosius and Galla had a son, Gratian, born in 388 and who died young, and a daughter, Aelia Galla Placidia (392–450). Placidia was the only child who survived to adulthood and later became an Empress.

Successful conclusion of the Gothic War (379–382)

The Goths and their allies (Vandals, Taifals, Bastarnae and the native Carpians) entrenched in the provinces of Dacia and eastern Pannonia Inferior consumed Theodosius's attention. The Gothic crisis was so dire that his co-Emperor Gratian relinquished control of the Illyrian provinces and retired to Trier in Gaul to let Theodosius operate without hindrance. A major weakness in the Roman position after the defeat at Adrianople was the recruiting of barbarians to fight against other barbarians. In order to reconstruct the Roman Army of the East, Theodosius needed to find able bodied soldiers and so he turned to the most capable men readily at hand: the barbarians recently settled in the Empire. This caused many difficulties in the battle against barbarians since the newly recruited fighters had little or no loyalty to Theodosius. It did not help that Theodosius himself was dangerously ill during many months after his elevation, being confined to his bed in Thessalonica during much of 379.^[10]



Roman provinces along the Ister (Danube), showing Dacia, Moesia and Thrace, with Sarmatia to the north and Germania to the northwest.

Gratian suppressed the incursions into dioceses of Illyria (Pannonia and Dalmatia) by Alathaeus and Saphrax in 380.^[11] Getting both to agree to a treaty and be settled in Pannonia.^[12] Theodosius was able finally to enter Constantinople in November 380, after two seasons in the field, having ultimately prevailed by offering highly favorable terms to the Gothic chiefs.^[11] His task was rendered much easier when Athanasius, an aged and cautious leader, accepted Theodosius's invitation to a conference in the capital, Constantinople, and the splendor of the imperial city



Federico Barocci, *Saint Ambrose forces Emperor Theodosius I to make penance for the Thessaloniki massacre* (1603), left-side nave, Saint Ambrose Altar, Milan Cathedral.

reportedly awed him and his fellow-chiefs into accepting Theodosius' offers.^[13] Athanaric himself died soon after, but his followers were impressed by the honorable funeral arranged for him by Theodosius, and agreed to defending the border of the empire.^[13] The final treaties with the remaining Gothic forces, signed 3 October 382, permitted large contingents of barbarians, primarily Thervingian Goths, to settle in Thrace south of the Danube frontier.^[14] The Goths now settled within the Empire would largely fight for the Romans as a national contingent, as opposed to being fully integrated into the Roman forces.^[14]

In 390 the population of Thessalonica rioted in complaint against the presence of the local Gothic garrison. The garrison commander was killed in the violence, so Theodosius ordered the Goths to kill all the spectators in the circus as retaliation; Theodoret, a contemporary witness to these events, reports:

... the anger of the Emperor rose to the highest pitch, and he gratified his vindictive desire for vengeance by unsheathing the sword most unjustly and tyrannically against all, slaying the innocent and guilty alike. It is said seven thousand perished without any forms of law, and without even having judicial sentence passed upon them; but that, like ears of wheat in the time of harvest, they were alike cut down.^[15]

Theodosius was excommunicated by the bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose, for the massacre.^[16] Ambrose told Theodosius to imitate David in his repentance as he had imitated him in guilt; Ambrose readmitted the emperor to the Eucharist only after several months of penance.

In the last years of Theodosius's reign, one of the emerging leaders of the Goths, named Alaric, participated in Theodosius's campaign against Eugenius in 394, only to resume his rebellious behavior against Theodosius's son and eastern successor, Arcadius, shortly after Theodosius' death.

Civil wars in the Empire (383–394)

In 383, the usurper Magnus Maximus had deposed and executed Gratian, proclaiming himself emperor of the west. Theodosius, unable to do much about Maximus due to his still inadequate military capability, opened negotiations with the Sasanid Emperor Shapur III.^[17] In an attempt to curb Maximus's ambitions, Theodosius appointed Flavius Neoterius as Praetorian Prefect of Italy.^[18]

The armies of Theodosius and Maximus fought at the Battle of the Save in 388, which saw Maximus defeated. On 28 August 388 Maximus was executed.^[19] Now the *de facto* ruler of the Western empire as well, Theodosius celebrated his victory in Rome on June 13, 389 and stayed in Milan until 391, installing his own loyalists in senior positions including the new *magister militum* of the West, the Frankish general Arbogast.^[19]

Trouble arose again, after Valentinian quarreled publicly with Arbogast, and was found hanging in his room. Arbogast announced that this had been a suicide. Arbogast, unable to assume the role of Emperor because of his non-Roman background, elected his creature Eugenius, a former teacher of rhetoric whom he had made



The administrative divisions of the Roman Empire in 395, under Theodosius I.

Valentinian's *master of offices*. Eugenius made some limited concessions to the Roman religion; like Maximus he sought Theodosius's recognition in vain. In January 393, Theodosius gave his son Honorius the full rank of "Augustus" in the West, citing Eugenius' illegitimacy.^[20]

Theodosius gathered a large army, including the Goths whom he had settled in the Eastern empire as Foederati, as well as Caucasian and Saracen auxiliaries, and marched against Eugenius. The two armies faced at the Battle of Frigidus in September 394.^[21] The battle began on 5 September 394, with Theodosius' full frontal assault on Eugenius's forces. Theodosius was repulsed on the first day, and Eugenius thought the battle to be all but over. In Theodosius's camp, the loss of the day decreased morale. It is said that Theodosius was visited by two "heavenly riders all in white" who gave him courage. The next day, the battle began again and Theodosius's forces were aided by a natural phenomenon known as the Bora, which produces cyclonic winds.^[22] The Bora blew directly against the forces of Eugenius and disrupted the line.

Eugenius's camp was stormed; Arbogast committed suicide and Eugenius was captured and soon after executed.^[22] Thus Theodosius became sole Emperor.

Art patronage

Theodosius oversaw the removal in 390 of an Egyptian obelisk from Alexandria to Constantinople.^[23] It is now known as the obelisk of Theodosius and still stands in the Hippodrome,^[23] the long racetrack that was the center of Constantinople's public life and scene of political turmoil. Re-erecting the monolith was a challenge for the technology that had been honed in the construction of siege engines. The obelisk, still recognizably a solar symbol, had been moved from Karnak to Alexandria with what is now the Lateran obelisk by Constantius II.

The Lateran obelisk was shipped to Rome soon afterwards, but the other one then spent a generation lying at the docks due to the difficulty involved in attempting to ship it to Constantinople. Eventually, the obelisk was cracked in transit. The white marble base is entirely covered with bas-reliefs documenting the imperial household and the engineering feat of removing it to Constantinople. Theodosius and the imperial family are separated from the nobles among the spectators in the imperial box, with a cover over them as a mark of their status. The naturalism of traditional Roman art in such scenes gave way in these reliefs to conceptual art: the *idea* of order, decorum and respective ranking, expressed in serried ranks of faces. This is seen as evidence of formal themes beginning to oust the transitory details of mundane life, celebrated in Roman portraiture.



Theodosius offers a laurel wreath to the victor, on the marble base of the Obelisk of Thutmose III at the Hippodrome of Constantinople.

The *Forum Tauri* in Constantinople was renamed and redecorated as the Forum of Theodosius, including a column and a triumphal arch in his honour.^[24]

Nicene Christianity becomes the state religion

Arianism

In 325, Constantine I convened the Council of Nicaea, which affirmed the doctrine that Jesus, the Son, was equal to God the Father and "of one substance" with the Father (*homoousios* in Greek). The Council condemned the teachings of Arius, who believed Jesus to be inferior to the Father.

Despite the council's ruling, controversy continued for decades, with several christological alternatives to the Nicene Creed being brought forth. Theologians attempted to bypass the Christological debate by saying that Jesus was merely like (*homoios* in Greek) God the father, without speaking of substance (*ousia*). These non-Nicenes were frequently labeled as Arians (i.e., followers of Arius) by their opponents, though not all would necessarily have identified themselves as such.^[25]

The Emperor Valens had favored the group who used the *homoios* formula; this theology was prominent in much of the East and had under Constantius II gained a foothold in the West, being ratified by the Council of Ariminum, though it was later abjured by a majority of the western bishops (after Constantius II's death in 361). The death of Valens damaged the standing of the Homoian faction, especially since his successor Theodosius steadfastly held to the Nicene Creed which was the interpretation that predominated in the West and was held by the important Alexandrian church.

Definition of orthodoxy

On 27 February 380, together with Gratian and Valentinian II, Theodosius issued the decree "*Cunctos populos*", the so-called Edict of Thessalonica, recorded in the Codex Theodosianus xvi.1.2. This declared the Nicene Trinitarian Christianity to be the only legitimate imperial religion and the only one entitled to call itself Catholic; but the other religions or those who did not support the Trinity, he described as "foolish madmen".^[26] He also ended official state support for the traditional polytheist religions and customs.^[27]

On 26 November 380, two days after he had arrived in Constantinople, Theodosius expelled the Homoian bishop, Demophilus of Constantinople, and appointed Meletius patriarch of Antioch, and Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian Fathers from Cappadocia (today in Turkey), patriarch of Constantinople. Theodosius had just been baptized, by bishop Ascholius of Thessalonica, during a severe illness.

In May 381, Theodosius summoned a new ecumenical council at Constantinople to repair the schism between East and West on the basis of Nicene orthodoxy.^[28] The council went on to define orthodoxy, including the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as equal to the Father and 'proceeding' from Him, whereas the Son was 'begotten' of Him.^[29] The council also "condemned the Apollonarian and Macedonian heresies, clarified jurisdictions of the bishops according to the civil boundaries of dioceses and ruled that Constantinople was second in precedence to Rome."^[29]

Proscription of pagan religion

The Christian persecution of Roman religion under Theodosius I began in 381, after the first couple of years of his reign in the Eastern Roman Empire. In the 380s, Theodosius I reiterated Constantine's ban on some practices of Roman religion, prohibited haruspicy on pain of death, decreed magistrates who did not enforce laws against polytheism were subject to criminal prosecution, broke up some pagan associations and tolerated attacks on Roman temples.

Between 389–392 he promulgated the Theodosian decrees^[30] (instituting a major change in his religious policies),^{[31]:116} which removed non-Nicene Christians from church office and abolished the last remaining expressions of Roman religion by making its holidays into workdays, banning blood sacrifices, closing Roman temples, confiscating Temple endowments and disbanding the Vestal Virgins.^[32] The practices of taking auspices and witchcraft were punished. Theodosius refused to restore the Altar of Victory in the Senate House, as asked by non-Christian senators.^{[31]:115}

In 392 he became sole emperor. From this moment till the end of his reign in 395, while non-Christians continued to request toleration,^{[33][34]} he ordered, authorized, or at least failed to punish, the closure or destruction of many temples, holy sites, images and objects of piety throughout the empire.^{[35][36][37][38][39]}

In 393 he issued a comprehensive law that prohibited any public non-Christian religious customs,^[40] and was particularly oppressive to Manicheans.^[41] He is likely to have discontinued the ancient Olympic Games, whose last record of celebration was in 393, though archeological evidence indicates that some games were still held after this date.^[42]

Death and legacy

Theodosius died, after suffering from a disease involving severe edema, in Milan on 17 January 395. Ambrose delivered a panegyric titled *De Obitu Theodosii*^[43] before Stilicho and Honorius in which Ambrose praised the suppression of paganism by Theodosius. Theodosius was finally buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople on 8 November 395,^[44] in a porphyry sarcophagus that was described in the 10th century by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in the *De Ceremoniis*.^[45]



Saint Ambrose barring Theodosius from Milan Cathedral, Anthony van Dyck, c. 1620

Theodosius's army rapidly dissolved after his death, with Gothic contingents raiding as far as Constantinople. As his heir in the Eastern Roman Empire he left Arcadius, who was about eighteen years old,^[46] and in the Western Roman Empire Honorius, who was ten.^[47] Neither ever showed any sign of fitness to rule, and their reigns were marked by a series of disasters. As their guardians Theodosius left Stilicho, who ruled in the name of Honorius in the Western Empire, and Flavius Rufinus who was the actual power behind the throne in the East. Several historians mark the day of Theodosius' death as the beginning of the Middle Ages.^[48]

See also

- De Fide Catolica
- Galla Placidia, daughter of Theodosius
- List of Byzantine emperors
- Roman emperors family tree
- Saint Fana
- Serena, niece of Theodosius and wife of Flavius Stilicho
- Zosimus, pagan historian from the time of Anastasius I

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2. *Cf. decree, infra.*
3. "Edict of Thessalonica": See Codex Theodosianus XVI.1.2
4. <https://oca.org/saints/lives/2000/01/17/109027-emperor-theodosius-the-great>
5. <http://www.saint.gr/1118/saint.aspx>

6. Hydatius *Chronicon*, year 379, ll.
7. Alicia M. Canto, "Sobre el origen bético de Teodosio I el Grande, y su improbable nacimiento en *Cauca de Gallaecia*" (https://www.academia.edu/1075565/Sobre_el_origen_b%C3%A9tico_de_Teodosio_I_el_Grande_y_su_improbable_nacimiento_en_Cauca_de_Gallaecia), *Latomus* 65/2, 2006, 388-421. The author points out that the city of *Cauca* was not part of *Gallaecia*, and demonstrates the probable interpolations of the traditional texts of Hydatius and Zosimus.
8. Zos. *Historia Nova* 4.24.4 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=FSMAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=zosimus&ei=xzm1R-euDJ6SzQT309jGBQ#PPA200,M1>).
9. Williams & Friell 1995, p. 13.
10. Williams & Friell 1995, p. 136.
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15. Davis 2004, p. 298.
16. Mackay 2004, p. 329.
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21. Williams & Friell 1995, p. 134.
22. Potter 2004, p. 533.
23. Majeska 1984, p. 256.
24. Meyers 1997, p. 61.
25. Lenski 2002, p. 235-237.
26. "Medieval Sourcebook: Theodosian Code XVI" (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/theodcodeXVI.html>).
27. Kaylor 2012, p. 14.
28. Williams & Friell 1995, p. 54.
29. Williams & Friell 1995, p. 55.
30. N Lewis; Reinhold Meyer (1990). *Empire* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=G07okHErcacC&pg=PA614>). Columbia University Press. pp. 614–. ISBN 978-0-231-07133-8. Retrieved 1 April 2013.
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33. Zosimus 4.59
34. Symmachus Relatio 3.
35. Grindle, Gilbert (1892) *The Destruction of Paganism in the Roman Empire*, pp.29–30. Quote summary: For example, Theodosius ordered Cynegius (Zosimus 4.37), the praetorian prefect of the East, to permanently close down the temples and forbade the worship of the deities throughout Egypt and the East. Most of the destruction in the East was perpetrated by Christian monks and bishops.
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External links

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Regnal titles		
<p>Preceded by <u>Valens</u></p>	<p><u>Roman Emperor</u> 379–395</p> <p>Served alongside: <u>Gratian</u>, <u>Valentinian II</u>, <u>Arcadius</u> and <u>Honorius</u></p>	<p>Succeeded by <u>Arcadius</u> and <u>Honorius</u></p>
Political offices		
<p>Preceded by <u>Ausonius</u>, <u>Quintus Clodius Hermogenianus Olybrius</u></p>	<p><u>Consul of the Roman Empire</u> 380 <i>with</i> <u>Gratian</u></p>	<p>Succeeded by <u>Flavius Syagrius</u>, <u>Flavius Eucherius</u></p>
<p>Preceded by <u>Valentinian II</u>, <u>Eutropius</u></p>	<p><u>Consul of the Roman Empire</u> 388 <i>with</i> <u>Maternus Cynegius</u> and <u>Magnus Maximus</u></p>	<p>Succeeded by <u>Timasius</u>, <u>Promotus</u></p>
<p>Preceded by <u>Arcadius</u>, <u>Rufinus</u></p>	<p><u>Consul of the Roman Empire</u> 393 <i>with</i> <u>Eugenius</u> and <u>Abundantius</u></p>	<p>Succeeded by <u>Imp. Caesar Arcadius Augustus III</u>, <u>Imp. Caesar Honorius Augustus II</u>, <u>Virius Nicomachus Flavianus</u></p>

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